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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION TO ROUNDTABLE ON THE U.S. HUMAN
RIGHTS REPORT ON YEMEN, MARCH 24, 2005.

1. SUMMARY: Post hosted a roundtable discussion March 24 to discuss with emeni stakeholders local reactions to the release of the 2004 Human Rights Report (HRR). The event, co-sponsored by the Yemeni Center for Human Rights (a local NGO) was attended by civil society representatives and various media organizations. State-run and ruling party media were generally critical of the report, characterizing its sources as "weak" and "unreliable" and the information as "inaccurate". These were shared by some opposition media. Independent media, however, offered straightforward coverage of the report and several NGO representatives judged the event "useful and informative". END SUMMARY

2. Various government media outlets, including Yemen TV, Al-Thawra official daily, Saba News Agency, and Aden-based October 14 focused mainly on the criticism that the report was "inaccurate." The official Al-Thawra daily (03/25) published a front-page report titled "legal experts criticize the State Department Human Rights Report on Yemen." Quoting unnamed sources, Al-Thawra said: "participants have indicated that, in spite of the hard work spent on this report, it contained mistakes particularly with regard to the rights of the handicapped, the issues of religious freedom, women and civil rights." Al-Thawra requested that "when preparing such reports the Yemeni civil society must be involved." All the above government media outlets highlighted DCM's statement describing Yemen's human rights record favorably "compared to previous years and other countries in the region."

2. Al-Mithaq weekly (03/28, mouthpiece of the ruling General People's Congress party) published a front-page report quoting unidentified lawyers, legal experts and civil society representatives as criticizing the U.S. human rights report "for relying on weak sources." Al-Mithaq added that roundtable participants all agreed "that the report distorted the facts and twisted meanings by relying on imprecise and uncertain sources in the process of information gathering."

3. A more detailed report was published by the widely read Al-Sahwa Net website (03/24, run by Islamic-oriented Al-Sahwa opposition weekly) which focused on key areas where the HRR stated "regression was witnessed" (re:press freedom). Al-Sahwa Net quoted a number of attendees of the roundtable who criticized the report's lack of "accuracy" and relying on "imprecise" sources when gathering information. In addition, Al-Sahwa Net referred to comments by other participants who accused the U.S. of "deliberately ignoring" more serious human rights abuses.

4. Notoriously anti-American Al-Wahdawi weekly (03/29, mouthpiece of the opposition Nasserite party) published a very critical report of what it called America's "human rights abuses." The report quoted prominent Yemeni writer and active Nasserite party member Mohamed Al-Sabri (one of the participants) as saying "America should first be brought to account for its own human rights abuses. It is stupid for us to deal with Washington as a charitable welfare organization." Al-Wahdawi continued to quote Al-Sabri: "The Americans have no right to impose on us their own standards with regard to human rights. Non-governmental organizations should be relied on instead to monitor and observe human rights abuses in Yemen."

5. Sawt al-Shura (03/28, monthly of the opposition Popular Forces Union) published an editorial attacking lack of autonomy in the Yemeni judiciary. The article claimed the findings of the 2004 HRR backed his assertion. relied on the U.S. human rights report on Yemen to back its claims. The article defended the U.S. report saying it should not be considered external interference with domestic affairs "since such reports help in disclosing the wrongdoings of bad governments."

16. The English-language Yemen Times bi-weekly gave front page coverage of the seminar stating that the 2004 HRR has stirred a lot of controversy, protests and comments by some Yemeni officials. Editorializing on the issue the Yemen Times continued: "The U.S. stance toward Yemen has a double-standard policy. Tension of the Yemeni government toward the report has led to forming a committee to respond to it."

17. COMMENT ON TELEVISION COVERAGE: Despite the fact that all regional TV channels were present during the seminar, only Al-Hurra broadcast a report which was objective and straightforward. END COMMENT

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